



Chetan Bhagat



Like him or loathe him, you can't ignore Chetan Bhagat. The IIT and IIM graduate (b. 1974) grew up in Delhi, chose investment banking as a career, but became an instant best-seller with his first novel *Five Point Someone: What not to do at IIT* (2004) about the pressures and let-downs of life at a premier educational establishment. Three more rapidly followed: *One Night @ the Call Center* (2005), *The 3 Mistakes of My Life* (2008) and *2 States: The Story of My Marriage* (2009). Bhagat built upon his initial success by becoming, quite simply, a publishing phenomenon. ~~The New York Times called him 'the biggest selling English language novelist in India's history' and, in 2010, Time magazine listed him among a hundred of 'the world's most influential people'.~~

With their simple plot lines, easily identifiable characters and situations and inexpensive pricing, his books target an aspiration-driven youth market. Bhagat himself—in casual T-shirts, jeans and stubble—has the air of the unaffected boy next door. Middle-class fathers hope their sons will grow up to become like him and middle-class mothers wish their daughters might marry someone like him. Imitation being the best form of flattery, his success has spawned a host of IIT and IIM graduates taking to fiction-writing. Having sold three of his novels to the movies, Bhagat quit his job in 2009 and set himself up as a full-time writer and public speaker.

You have written four books in five years and been described by the *New York Times* as the biggest selling Indian writer in the subcontinent. What does it feel like to become a kind of one-man fiction industry in so short a period?

I feel great, of course, and there's no reason to feel otherwise. The way you describe it, it seems like I have been working as hard at writing fiction as I did as an investment banker. I am used to those fourteen-hour days that banking demands—and maybe I have been too prolific.

You have certainly turned fiction writing into something more profitable than banking. Are you laughing all the way to the bank?

I feel a tremendous sense of power that whatever I write is read by millions of people of the younger generation and that has empowered me to become bolder in my fiction writing. I have started writing columns in English and Hindi newspapers which, of course, aren't fiction. I take up topical issues and the response is also empowering. It feels like the power of the pen is back.

Your first book, *Five Point Someone*, was about your experiences at IIT—what to do at IIT or, rather, what not to do there. It was fairly autobiographical and took you several years to write. Was its success a fluke?

I can't say if it was a fluke, but yes, it was definitely random. There were so many publishers that rejected the book; and even when it came out, people said it's nice, but no one had a clue that we would be talking about it in 2009, six years after its release, what with *3 Idiots* [the film based on the book] coming out. You could call it fluke or divine intervention.

Certainly *Five Point Someone* touched a chord. Why was that? Was it a formula, a particular style of writing, or did it have an honesty that made your first novel a cult?

I think it was fresh. I feel that the literary industry, ever since we started chasing prizes like the Booker, became very pretentious. Imagine if the Indian film industry only produced films for international film festivals. Where would Bollywood end up if it only did that? My readers say that they *find* themselves, an insight into themselves, in my books. It is things they can associate with, for example, the depression of getting low grades. They feel that they are not alone.

You were exceptional in terms of your education. You not only made it to IIT Delhi but also to IIM Ahmedabad, the premier management institute. In that sense you are an achiever. Do you think many of your readers aspire to such standards of educational success?

If my books were not so successful and I was a failure, readers would certainly not identify with me as much. It's human nature to chase success. I agree I am the poster boy of Indian middle-class success. I

went to these colleges, became recognized for my work, so in a sense I am an 'achievable' aspiration. When you see Hrithik Roshan or Shahrukh Khan on screen, you feel, 'Oh, they're so great but in no way I can be them.' But when they see me they think, 'Oh well, he kind of looks like me. Maybe one day I could get there if I work as hard.'

Your subjects moved from the campus to call centres. And your third novel, *3 Mistakes*—about three chaps in Ahmedabad who set up a cricket shop, against the backdrop of your IIM life—cashes in on the Indian craze for cricket. And now, your new novel, *2 States*, draws upon an inter-regional marriage, just like yours: a Punjabi boy marrying a Tamil girl. It's the classic Indian conflict, of love versus arranged marriage. In real life you also married a Tamil classmate at IIM. So whole chunks of your life go into your books?

I shamelessly borrow from my life. However, I do fictionalize and dramatize it to make interesting stories. I feel my story of an inter-regional marriage, with growing migrations in India, would appeal to younger people who leave home to study or find jobs. They are likely to meet Indians of the opposite sex, not necessarily from their region. They may face resistance when they go back to their parents and say that they would like to spend the rest of their lives with this person. And I feel that until this resistance and prejudice ends, India cannot be one country. We say we are very secular but when it comes to marrying your child in another community, then your true prejudices come out. I feel what I did, marrying a woman from another community, was a good thing for India. In a broader sense, if everyone was to do the same, we would overcome regional divisions. We would become pure Indians. And if we become a pure Indian race then we deserve to be a superpower and will be one.

But it's still the boy-meets-girl formula, with many Bollywood or Hollywood clichés ...

You know I was very worried about that because every second movie in India is a boy-meets-girl story and every second novel is the same. So I worked on a theme arising from a very basic observation—that in India a love story never exists in isolation. You cannot have a boy in love with a girl or a girl loving a boy and them getting married. Two families and communities, even clans, have to fall in love with one another. Everyone has to fall in love with everyone. And by the time

you make that happen, there is almost no love left between the boy and the girl. So 75 per cent of my book is about convincing the family.

How do you work? Do you produce drafts and write with regular discipline every day?

Earlier I would write in fits and starts because I was working in a bank; it was very stressful to find time. Having left my job to become a full-time writer, I'm more disciplined. Typically I write when my kids go to school. I drop them to school, come back and write; but when they get back home, I can't concentrate. I do lots of drafts. My editors also make points like, 'Chetan, for your readership the word "cognizable" may not work.' I know my critics think I'm a lowbrow hack but . . .

Lowbrow formula writer, commercial-minded and playing to the gallery. Does such criticism hurt?

Call it what you will but if I were writing to please critics it would mean that many readers in the country would not be able to read my books. I would think that selfish. Think of the thrill when a young Indian kid from a Hindi-medium school reads an English book, and enjoys it; his self-confidence is changed forever. He will put it on his resumé, 'I read in English.' That is a very big thing for me. A writer wants impact. Some writers want aesthetics and want to be appreciated for it. I am more about impact.

Your outreach with four novels has in fact been so massive that you have actually given up a very well-paid career in banking to become a full-time writer. Any regrets?

I don't think there are any regrets. I'm a happier person. Of course I make less money than what I would have with two jobs. But writing for me, compared to a well-paid banking career, is an incredible experience. What is money really? Someone once said that whatever money you keep in the bank the day you die is the extra work you have done. It's money you shouldn't have. There's no point.

But you're still doing double duty, as writer and house husband, while your wife, as a professional banker, is the regular breadwinner. Is that tough?

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Yes, it's very hard. Now my wife comes home and says, why hasn't this bill been paid and why is there no gobi in the house? I have to give an answer. I need to keep the dhobi account. I just paid the milkman's bill before I took the flight to come here. But it's fun and I'm very lucky. Sometimes I feel that in my whole IIM batch I'm the only guy who is in the park with his children on a Tuesday afternoon. They are working in a bank, making rich people richer. I am trying to make some kids read. I think that's kind of cool.

Three of your four novels have been turned into screenplays. Do you see books-into-films as the bigger opportunity?

If I want to reach out to the public, knowing that Indians love films, the answer is yes. It's a good avenue to earn more and it's a challenge for me. Now I am more involved in the film adaptations of my books because I've left my job. And I also want to learn to write scripts. At the time of *3 Idiots* I couldn't. I wasn't even in India. Now I want to master scripts. In fact for two years I will only do screenplays.

As a professional screenplay writer will you write original stories or do you hope to write to order for film-makers?

That's a very good question because no matter how commercial I may seem, I have written my stories in my own way. Someone may say that a superstar wants a script, can you write it and, I would say no, I can't. I have not sold my soul. Broadly, Chetan Bhagat is going to use Bollywood, and Bollywood is not going to use Chetan Bhagat.

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